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Crowning Jupiter: the 2017 French Electoral Series in perspective

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Abstract

This article discusses the 2017 elections in the context of a framework of analysis based on three levels of analysis: the institutional, the partisan and the situational. The framework used not only elucidates the extraordinary campaign and results, but places them in a diachronic perspective in order to assess the claim that the 2017 electoral series marked a partisan realignment. The 2017 campaign rewrote almost all of the rules associated with the presidential election. For the first time in the Fifth Republic, the incumbent president decided not to stand for re-election, signifying a state of institutional disarray. Moreover, neither of the candidates representing the traditional governing parties, the Republicans or the Socialists, won through to the second round, which saw centrist Emmanuel Macron comfortably elected against the National Front's Marine Le Pen. Following in the wake of Macron's presidential victory, the 2017 parliamentary election conferred upon the Jupiterean President the overall parliamentary majority he had called for. If the presidency has escaped its worst-case scenario, and if Macron's election provides a window of opportunity to revive the presidency, the question of political and institutional trust is far from resolved.

The presidential election is traditionally considered as the core decisive election on which French politics is centred. The 2017 presidential contest was the tenth direct

election of the Fifth Republic. The headline conclusions of the two rounds of 23 April and 7 May are rapidly summarised. For the first time in the Fifth Republic, the candidate representing the mainstream republican Right (understood as comprising both the Gaullist and liberal-conservative traditions) did not win through to the second round; and, while the Socialists failed in 1969 and 2002, the candidate they supported has also usually fought in the run-off (1965, 1974, 1981, 1988, 1995, 2007 and 2012). Not so in 2017. Exit the two main governmental parties of the Fifth Republic. Though predicted by the polls, the exclusion of the candidates from the two historic governing parties of the Fifth Republic – Benoît Hamon for the Parti socialiste (PS) and François Fillon for Les Républicains (LR) – demonstrated an unprecedented disaffection with party and the candidates designated by the primaries. The death of the left-right cleavage was declared amongst academics and in the media (Agrikolianski, 2017; Rouvier, 2017). The final victory of centrist Emmanuel Macron over the Front national's (FN) Marine Le Pen was logical; though the margin (66.1% to 33.9%) was tighter than the 2002 second round, when Jacques Chirac was triumphantly re-elected with 81.75% against Jean-Marie Le Pen, it was more comfortable than had been suggested by most surveys. The real story lies elsewhere: in the record number of spoilt ballots in the second round (about 12 per cent), as many first round voters refused the choice between Macron and Le Pen; in the deep political, territorial and ideological fracture revealed by both rounds; in the division between a forward looking, metropolitan and pro-European nation and a peripheral, forgotten and neglected France; and in the unprecedented loss of trust in established political parties and representative mediators.

To capture the full message of the 2017 contest, a broad temporal perspective is required, one that admits the specific nature of each presidential election, but which also allows structural regularities to emerge through comparison of electoral rules and trends. This article discusses the 2017 elections in the context of a framework of analysis based on three levels of analysis: the institutional, the partisan and the situational (Cole 2013). The framework used not only elucidates the extraordinary campaign and results, but places them in a diachronic perspective in order to assess the claim that the 2017 electoral series marked a partisan realignment.

The institutional dimension

The French presidency might be considered in its own terms as an institution in two core senses of this term. In a traditional understanding, it is defined in precise ways by constitutional and political rules and legal norms. In line with new institutionalist thinking, it also represents a set of expectations about the personal and political roles that a French president ought to perform (March and Olsen, 1989; Hall and Taylor, 1996; Bedock, 2017). The French presidency is sometimes presented as a timeless institution, a successful office that has restored stability (after the precarious disequilibrium of the Fourth Republic) and provided the model of an original hybrid, the semi-presidential regime, that has been subsequently been imitated in several other countries. Stability has been celebrated by incumbent French presidents, from General de Gaulle (who lauded the presidency as the alternative to a return of chaos) through to François Hollande (who evoked the stability of the institutions in his attempt to survive a period of unprecedented unpopularity from 2012 to 2014).

On the eve of Macron's election, however, commentators were openly questioning whether the French presidency was still fit for purpose. The core institutional traits of the office were shaped in a period far removed from the challenges facing France in 2017. The presidential office itself had evolved to such an extent that the public's perception of presidential action was rarely dissociated from the cleavages of domestic politics. After a long-period of presidential withdrawal under Jacques Chirac (1995–2007), Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency (2007–12) was based on a transgression of the key personal and institutional codes, most notably on a deeply political reading of the office, whereby the political leader slated opponents and invited unpopularity in response to detailed interventionism in politics and policy-making. Though Hollande's (2012–17) personal presidential style was light years away from that of Sarkozy – ponderous, hesitant and deliberative – he faced similar constraints (the demand for rapid action to resolve crises; occupying the frontline in the economic crisis [unemployment, economic growth, competitiveness]).

In the case of the past two presidents, the supra-partisan ideal of the French presidency gave way to a more sharply defined partisan appeal. The blame game (Sarkozy's rupture with the Chirac years, Hollande's persistent anti-Sarkozy stance) devalued the presidential institution. Sarkozy's claim to embody supra-partisan neutrality during the economic crisis from 2008 to 2010 was difficult to sustain given his hyper-presidentialist activism (Raymond, 2013). Likewise, Hollande failed to rise above the Socialist party politics that had propelled him to office after his success in the 2011 PS primary election. This distance between the president and public opinion was aggravated by the reality of tripartite party politics since 2002 (and especially since the

consolidation of the FN under Marine Le Pen after 2011), squeezed with great difficulty into the rules of bipolar institutional competition.

In sum, the 2017 election represented a major challenge for the French presidency as an institution. The office has suffered from diminished political capacity, as successive presidents have failed to live up to the expectations of their electoral campaigns. Understanding Macron's election makes sense in the context of a calling into question of the left-right bipolar cleavage, but also in terms of the modernisation of core political institutions. Unlike his rivals Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Hamon, who called for a Sixth Republic based on revived parliamentary institutions, Macron set out to restore the prestige of the presidential office, to the point of theorising the office and his own practice in terms of the Jupiterean presidency, above parties, above the fray and in (rarefied) direct contact with the people. In the language of new institutionalism, Macron set out to restore a form of presidential appropriateness, based on rules, norms and expectations inherited from earlier practices, notably the early years of the Fifth Republic. In a more traditional vein, the new president also made explicit his intention to strengthen the presidency and restore its former ascendancy, surfing on a deep anti-party sentiment that is considered in the following section.

The Partisan and anti-Partisan Dimensions

One interest in looking at the 'not so small n' of France's presidential elections since the first one in 1965 is that of accompanying the evolution of the party system. The nine presidential elections before 2017 provide a laboratory for understanding broader,

longer term electoral trends, party configurations and structural incentives. Each presidential contest gives rise to new debates about the nature of the party system, with existing conceptualisations (generally deduced from observing previous elections) invariably challenged in some respect by the most recent electoral series. Hence, the victory of the Socialist candidate, François Mitterrand, in 1981 laid bare the temporal boundedness of the ‘bipolar quadrille’ that had been theorised at great length after the 1978 parliamentary election.¹ In turn, the frame of bipolar multipartism, that explained quite well the 1981 contest, was challenged by the contested tripartite division of political space from the mid-1980s onwards, as the rise of the FN produced the appearance of three partisan blocs (Knapp, 2004; Grunberg and Schweisguth, 2003; Andersen and Evans, 2003). After the 2007 electoral series had appeared to break the FN and consolidate the mainstream UMP and PS, analyses were once again squarely focused on left-right bipolarisation (Grunberg and Haegel, 2007). The 2012 contest appeared to reaffirm the centrality of bipolar electoral competition, with the two second-round candidates representing the Socialists and the UMP, the key governmental parties of the Fifth Republic.

In 2017, it made more sense to reason in terms of the anti-partisan dimension. The claim that 2017 was a realigning election, in radical break with other presidential contests, was supported in some respects by the first-round results, where both governmental parties were excluded from the second-round run-off. The real headline

1. The bipolar quadrille: in the 1978 parliamentary election four parties of almost equal weight (two from both right and left) divided France into opposing camps.

story of the 2017 election related to the collapse of the governmental parties and the ebbing of the left-right cleavage, as much as to the changing structure of the party system (which is unclear, but which falls short of the dominant party system predicted in the immediate aftermath of Macron's election) (Bugeau, 2017). Three challenges to party became manifest during the 2017 campaign, each of which are illuminated by comparison with the other presidential elections of the Fifth Republic.

Left-right bipolarisation and the presidentialisation of the party system.

One unwritten rule confined to history in 2017 is that the presidential election encourages a left-right bipolarisation and a corresponding presidentialisation of the party system. This was always an excessively institutional argument; each presidential election has produced a rather different political configuration (see Table 1).

[Table 1 around here]

From 1965 to 2012, the logic of institutional and political equilibria, on balance, favoured a pattern of left-right bipolar competition. The left-right scenario prevailed in 1965, 1974, 1981, 1988, 1995, 2007 and 2012. On two occasions the expected left-right bipolar confrontation did not take place. In 1969, the centrist candidate Alain Poher faced the Gaullist Georges Pompidou. In 2002, the outgoing Gaullist President Chirac fought a run-off against the FN candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen. In these two elections, the left was eliminated from the second round.

In practice, the bipolar logic of the presidential election, as assumed to have shaped political and party competition throughout most of the Fifth Republic, has appeared

increasingly out of kilter with the underlying three-, four- or five-party reality. One consequence of fitting a three-, four- or five- party reality into the bipolar jacket is that the threshold levels for gaining access to the second round is lowered: to around 20 per cent. Combined with the partisan logic of the primary elections, the first round logic of rallying core supporters was more pronounced than ever in 2017. Candidates gave their primacy to first round mobilisation over the anticipation of second round strategies in 2017, because the outcome of the first round was far less certain than in any other recent presidential races (except 2002). Macron was arguably the exception. His successful positioning in terms of being anti-party and beyond left and right offered him a competitive advantage in the context where candidates of the traditional governing parties were above all turned inwards in the process of primaries.

The effects of the primaries

The primaries presented a paradoxical mix of challenges and opportunities for the existing parties. The open primary of the Right and the Centre was contested in November 2016, while the Socialist Party and the left Radicals (in the so-called Belle Alliance Populaire) held their internal primary in January 2017. Why did the parties hold open primary elections (whereby sympathisers, rather than simply party activists, vote for their preferred candidates over two rounds of voting)? The general enthusiasm for embracing open primaries to select a party's presidential candidate was the logical consequence of the PS contest of 2011, when the primary election produced victory for the candidate best placed to defeat the incumbent, President Sarkozy (Lefebvre 2011). More generally, the adoption of the primary allowed parties to attempt to renovate their

organisations by acknowledging the demand for new forms of participation. In parties across Europe, primary elections (or similar mechanisms) have mobilised, first and foremost, enthusiastic (young) activists and sympathisers in search of ideological renewal and survival.²

Each primary campaign produced an early promise, based on the premises of a clear victor. The fortunes of the candidates in the LR primary oscillated widely once the campaign began in earnest in late summer 2016, but most had assumed that the run-off would pit former President Sarkozy against former Prime Minister Alain Juppé. In the event, François Fillon, long considered as the outsider, emerged in powerful first position (44.1 per cent in the first round), though he had been trailing with barely 10 per cent in fourth place only a few weeks earlier. The Socialist primary was held two months later and again produced an ‘upset’, as the third-placed candidate Hamon came from behind to eliminate fellow party rebel Arnaud Montebourg in the first round, before eliminating former Prime Minister Manuel Valls in the run-off (56.69 per cent to 41.31 per cent), with two million sympathisers voting. The tone was set for the most unpredictable of presidential election campaigns.

In both cases, the hollowing out of the central party organisation meant that the primaries were institutional mechanisms with unintended effects. In the case of Les Républicains, the logic of the primaries extended far beyond the selection of the party’s

² The specific case of the UMP, then LR was rather different: Sarkozy’s return to take control of the organisation in November 2014 was accompanied by a commitment to introduce primaries, forced upon him by Alain Juppé and François Fillon.

candidate. At the height of the Fillon ‘affair’ in early March 2017, the *Républicain* candidate used the result of the LR primary to fend off challenges to his candidacy. As Fillon pointed out, in a televised interview on France 2 (5 March 2017), no-one could prevent him from standing as candidate (all the more in that he had already deposited the 500 signatories necessary to stand), not even the investigating magistrates who had announced the opening of a legal inquiry and ordered the candidate to appear before them on 15 March. On the Socialist left, the primary created a gulf between the candidate and the mass of PS députés, deeply anxious about their – slim – prospects of re-election. The aftermath of the primary retained a bitter taste, as few close to Valls became involved in the Hamon campaign and the former prime minister committed the supreme act of treason by announcing his vote for Macron before the first round. In both cases, the primaries marginalised the party organisation.

In sum, the *Républicain* (2016) and Socialist (2017) primaries destabilised party organisations, upset existing hierarchies and moved the putative presidential candidates to campaign in terms of core electors (witness Fillon’s harsh attack on the French welfare state or Hamon’s support for a universal revenue) at the expense of the elusive median voter. Nor was it obvious that the primaries were mainly used to select the best presidential candidate. In the specific case of the Socialist primary, some 73 per cent declared their priority to be that of selecting a candidate faithful to the values of the left, as against only 24 per cent who considered their vote would help to select a future president (ELABE, 2017a). But were the primaries principally to blame for the collapse of the governmental parties? Did they really undermine the foundations of presidential institutions, weaken political parties and produce candidates that were unrepresentative

of the broader electorate? Perhaps the primaries were not principally at fault. As Grunberg argues, the parties were deeply divided anyway – this is why the primaries took place in the first instance (Grunberg, 2017). The real crisis lay in the dangerously diminished legitimacy of political parties and their internal divisions.

Campaigning against parties

Each presidential campaign takes place in a distinct historical period, where the script cannot be written too far in advance. Some campaigns are more favourable to specific agendas than others. In 2002, for example, the security turn of the election was supported by underlying survey work on public preferences, which demonstrated that crime and security issues were high up the voters' agenda. In 2007, security remained important, but the broader promise of far-reaching change went beyond a narrow focus on security. In 2012, by contrast, evidence on public attitudes strongly suggested that social and economic issues were at the centre of French voters' concerns (Lewis-Beck, Nadeau and Bélanger, 2012). The public policy mood was a sombre one, tainted by a fear of globalisation and economic insecurity (Stimson, Tiberj and Thiébault, 2013). In 2017, public policy debates were overwhelmed by a crisis of trust in political parties and a desire to sweep away the established partisan order. In the summer of 2016, I argued that the theme of the Republic in Danger would likely shape the forthcoming presidential election; the dispute over the Burkini appeared at the thin end of the identity wedge (Cole, 2017). As the campaign began in earnest, however, concerns over national identity were crowded out by the linked themes of corruption, influence, transparency and the need to clean up French politics.

The 2017 campaign laid bare the depth of public suspicion towards the mainstream parties. The theme of the people against the elites is a constant of contemporary French (and European) politics, but never before has there been such fierce competition to occupy this space. Vying for the anti-system, anti-party space was a core characteristic of the leading candidates in the 2017 campaign. Each of the leading candidates campaigned on an anti-party platform. Mélenchon surfed on the populist, anti-party theme of La France insoumise (LFI), an adaptation of France's radical, revolutionary tradition to the digital age. Hamon framed his bid in terms of new forms of political participation and against the policy record of the 2012–17 Socialist governments. Marine Le Pen's traditional anti-establishment, national populist stance was strongly articulated in the 2017 campaign. The most original contribution was that of Macron, whose En Marche! movement, created in April 2016, positioned itself explicitly as anti-party, a movement transcending left and right whose practices relied more on sophisticated marketing techniques (diffused via social networks), on co-creation in public policy (the presidential platform) and on civic and political mobilisation that portrayed itself as novel (les marcheurs). Even Fillon, though prime minister from 2007 to 2012, positioned himself as in rupture with the traditional compromises of party and played the people against the elites card. This diffuse anti-party sentiment spilled over into party platforms in the 2017 campaign. The primaries revealed the diminished importance of parties as vehicles for public policies and presidential platforms: in the case of the Socialist and LR campaigns, the candidates imposed their preferences on (skeptical) party organisations.

As the campaign dust settled, a broader political and programmatic debate began to emerge. In early March 2017, Macron finally presented his programme after many weeks of delay and preparation. Macron's mix of economic liberalism, social protection, political moderation and European integration brought comparisons with the UK's New Labour, with two decades delay (Parmentier, 2017). Liberal in terms of social mores and respectful of plural French identities (hence more accommodating towards French citizens of immigrant origin), Macron also appeared as liberal in the economic sense in that he sought to reform labour law, encourage business innovation and investment and make France fitter for purpose in embracing the challenges of economic globalisation. Macron explicitly engaged himself in defence of the European project, including a public commitment to bring France back within the criteria of the Maastricht stability pact. Le Pen's national populist programme, in contrast, articulated the demand for closed frontiers, an 'intelligent' protectionism (taxation on imported goods), tough restrictions on immigration, national preference and the recovery of an (illusory) monetary sovereignty, with France eventually exiting the euro after a referendum. The two second-round candidates at least represented clear alternative visions of the future based on differing positions on the national protection, European integration and globalisation spectrum. The traditional parties – the Socialists and the Républicains – were either too divided or too exhausted to compete effectively.

The situational dimension: campaign and results

French presidential elections are usually fought in the context of the record of an outgoing government and an election campaign. The 2017 campaign rewrote almost all

of the rules and presuppositions associated with the presidential election. For the first time in the Fifth Republic, the incumbent president decided not to stand for re-election, thereby depriving the campaign of one of its major political functions (testing the accountability of an outgoing administration). In late 2016, President Hollande appeared to face an impossible dilemma: to be the first president not to stand for re-election or to stand as a candidate with the danger of not reaching the second round. He chose the former option, disrupting the carefully laid plans of his closest supporters and – following the defeat of Valls in the Socialist primary – depriving the 2017 campaign of any candidate explicitly defending the record of the outgoing government. Hollande's dignified but unprecedented announcement in December 2016 that he would not stand for re-election was another novel precedent in the Fifth Republic. Diminished for years as a result of persistently negative opinion poll ratings, Hollande fell victim to his proximity to journalists (Davet and Lhomme, 2016), and the coup de grâce exercised by two former protégés: former Economy minister Macron, who resigned in summer 2016 to concentrate on creating the En Marche! movement and standing for the presidency; and former Prime Minister Valls, who put maximum pressure on Hollande not to stand and thus pave the way for his own presidential bid.

Did the 2017 campaign make a difference? There are three ways of answering this question, with varying degrees of sophistication. Fine-grained statistical analysis can be used to engage in electoral forecasting, a highly inexact science (Lewis-Beck, Nadeau and Bélanger, 2012). Other more qualitative work can accompany the campaign trajectories of individually selected voters (Gaxie, 2012). A third, blunter instrument can observe variation throughout the campaign in terms of the fortunes of the leading

candidates. Of the various opinion poll instruments available, the most convincing was the CEVIPOF's 2017 Election survey, a rolling survey of over 20,000 individuals that reported virtually on a monthly basis³. Table 2 presents the evolution of candidate fortunes over the period of the twelve months preceding the first round.

[Table 2 around here]

There is strong circumstantial evidence that the 2017 campaign made a difference. The primaries provided a short-term mobilisation of Républicain and Socialist supporters and a boost for the LR and PS candidates, Fillon and Hamon. In neither case did this last for long. In terms of the campaign proper, 2017 was marked by the rise and fall of individual candidates: the LR candidate descended rapidly from his post-primary pedestal as the Fillon 'affair' gripped the public's attention (26 per cent of forecast votes in December 2016; 24 per cent in January 2016 before the affair broke, 18.5 per cent at the height of the crisis).⁴ Le Pen started with a commanding lead, surfing on the FN's status as the leading party of France in the three previous elections (European elections,

³ There were fifteen waves, altogether, of the IPSOS-SOPRA-STERIA, Le Monde-CEVIPOF 'Enquête électorale française 2017', the authoritative rolling survey, which followed a panel of 21,326 registered electors through the ups and downs of the campaign from February 2016 to June 2017.

⁴ The Fillon 'affair' dominated the campaign. A series of revelations by the satirical newspaper *Le Canard enchaîné* revealed that Fillon had employed his wife as a very well-paid parliamentary assistant, as well as his children, though they were students at the time. The substance of the affair was taken to symbolise changing standards of public behaviour and to focus attention on the question of conflict of interests. Fillon's reaction made matters worse, ignoring his initial promise not to stand as candidate if formally investigated (*mise en examen*) by the judiciary.

2014; departmental elections 2015; regional elections, 2015). As Table 2 illustrates her lead narrowed throughout the campaign; inaudible (by choice) until early February as a consequence of her quest for respectability (hence her campaign slogan *La France apaisée*), she started campaigning in earnest at around the same time as the scandal over FN assistants in the European parliament deepened.⁵ By the time Hamon secured the PS nomination, in late January 2017, the campaign had barely three months left to run (and the first month was wasted in negotiations with Europe-Écologie-Les Verts and Mélenchon's *France insoumise*). The two most successful first-round candidates were Mélenchon, who rose from under 10 per cent to almost 20 per cent over the course the campaign, and Macron, whose faltering campaign was decisively boosted by the decision of François Bayrou, the historic centrist, in February not to stand as candidate and instead rally to Macron.

The first-round campaign was tightly fought and there was genuine uncertainty about the outcome. The main dynamic appeared to be with Mélenchon, who excelled during the two televised debates, and Macron, who surfed on the anti-party wave as a candidate with a clean pair of hands, beyond left and right, and who could be entrusted to modernise France. Fillon and Le Pen both stagnated, while Hamon suffered from the Mélenchon dynamic and his own shortcomings. The Macron campaign was not deprived of bombast and conceit, not least in the parallels drawn by Macron's supporters (and himself) with the creation of the Fifth Republic in 1958. His movement,

⁵ For her part, Marine Le Pen refused to respond to the injunction to appear in front of the judges to explain the FN's behavior in using European Parliament funds to employ its own permanent staff in France. The suspicion of conflict of interests resurfaced.

En Marche !, bore some similarities with the Gaullists of 1958: it framed itself both as cross-party (picking the best talents), and anti-party (against the ‘parties’ accused of undermining governmental authority and being self-serving); it positioned itself as being neither left nor right; it operated in practice as a presidential rally to support an individual diagnosed as having exceptional qualities. In 2017, Macron represented (for a while) the sign of the times, the repository of the electorate’s general distrust in the mainstream parties, a candidate determined to clean up politics who could appeal to mainstream former Socialist and Républicain voters.

The extraordinary feature of the 2017 campaign, however, lay not so much in Macron’s (relative) success, as in the heavy underlying forces that swept aside the main parties in the presidential contest. First and foremost, there was the public’s reaction against the ‘affairs’ of the candidates, that of Fillon in particular, that prevented the electoral victory that most experts were predicting after the primaries. Second, the lack of focus on distributive, redistributive or regulatory political issues: the extraordinary climate of anti-politics produced a side-lining of the discussion of major issues of policy, a phenomenon that attracted interest and anxiety in foreign capitals. The deep unpopularity of President Hollande and the governing Socialists left little space for a defence of the 2012–17 mandate, and the contradictory debate this supposed. Moreover, even the European issue was blurred by the inconsistent positions adopted by Le Pen,

Fillon, Hamon and Mélenchon.⁶ Finally, the campaign and results provided evidence of a deeply ingrained mistrust of the established political parties (in particular).⁷

Interpreting the results

The first round of the presidential election, which was by far the decisive round in the electoral series, might in part be interpreted as a realigning election (Martin, 2000). A realigning election represents first a moment of rupture, a radical break with the old order; this is then followed by a realignment around new issues, in all probability channeled by new political organisations. The first round of the 2017 presidential election had all the appearances of a radical break; the traditional governmental parties (PS and LR) obtaining barely more than one-quarter of first round votes (26.29 per cent), down from well over one-half (55.81 per cent) in 2012. The 2017 election provided stark evidence of the deep distrust for all the established political parties. The crisis of the Socialists was particularly acute during the 2012–17 presidency; the first round sanctioned Hamon, one of the leaders of the parliamentary rebels, whose come-uppance took the form of a humiliating 6.3 per cent vote share. While the rejection of the existing establishment parties was the defining feature of the electoral series, it is

⁶ The FN's position on quitting the Euro divided the FN itself and appeared to be called into question only days before the first round. Mélenchon struck a markedly anti-European tone, but refused to rule out remaining within the EU and the euro. Fillon and Hamon both struck a notably euro-critical note. Only Macron explicitly endorsed further European integration.

⁷ The extent of distrust is regularly revealed by the CEVIPOF's Baromètre de la confiance politique, a major survey into public attitudes towards politicians and parties.

less clear that 2017 marked an *ideological* paradigm shift, as opposed to eclectic, random and inconsistent responses to the pressing policy issues of the day.⁸

Macron and Le Pen won through to the second round. The two second-round contenders were well-positioned in terms of the two key defining features of the 2017 campaign: the rejection of existing parties and a clear position in terms of the progressive/nationalist cluster of issues. The 2017 campaign produced symbolic positioning in terms of boundaries, borders and space, centred on the cleavage between what Marine Le Pen called ‘mondialists’ and patriots. These positions were reflected in the respective electoral support bases of the two candidates: Macron leading in the metropolises (especially Lyon, Paris, Toulouse and Rennes); Le Pen ahead in *la France périphérique* (Roger, 2017a). The centrality of the cosmopolitan/ nationalist divide cut across traditional lines of cleavage and blurred still further the boundaries between left and right. The positioning of Mélenchon was particularly significant in this respect. A resolute opponent of ‘Brussels’ and European integration, the LFI candidate refused to call explicitly upon his voters to support Macron in the second-round run-off.

Macron’s victory in the second round had been announced in advance (no opinion poll gave him less than 58 per cent in the run-off), but it was more comfortable than initially imagined: 66.10 per cent against 33.90 per cent for Le Pen. The polls suggested that the margin of the final result was influenced by the second-round campaign and

⁸ Macron’s programme was illustrative of this incremental approach: in line with the theme of co-construction, the programme itself was based on propositions tested in focus groups and on ideas received through the website and social media.

particularly by the candidates' televised debate, where an aggressive Marine Le Pen failed to destabilize Macron, lost her cool and, in contrast to her opponent, demonstrated little mastery of her policy dossiers. A survey credited Macron with having gained 3 percentage points as a direct result of the debate (ELABE, 2017b). Macron won majorities in all departments, save two (Pas-de-Calais and Aisne), while Le Pen had led in 47 (against 41 for Macron) in the first round. The metropolises and sizeable cities overwhelmingly voted for Macron; 85 per cent in Lyon, 83 per cent in Marseilles, almost 90 per cent in Paris, 78 per cent in Lille. The small towns and countryside voted for Le Pen – in places, at least. With 10,638,475 votes, Marine Le Pen obtained the best score ever for the FN, and more than doubled the total number of votes by comparison to her father in 2002. Macron polled twice as many (20,743,128), however, well ahead of Sarkozy in 2007 and Hollande in 2012. There was a mild controversy over whether Macron had been well elected or not. Only around 40 per cent of Macron voters declared in post-election surveys that their vote was motivated by explicit support for the new president and optimism for the programme or the candidate rather than a rejection of the Le Pen alternative (IPSOS-SOPRA-STERIA, 2017). Beyond those who voted, the record high number of spoilt ballots (*nuls* and *blancs*), reached almost 12 per cent of those cast, more than in any other election of the Fifth Republic.

The aftermath: the parliamentary election

One of the core assumptions of the presidential-parliamentary electoral series is that the presidential election brings in its wake a comfortable majority for the victorious candidate in the subsequent parliamentary election. Since the 2000 constitutional reform

and the inversion of the electoral calendar, there has been a powerful institutional incentive to provide the victorious president with the ‘means to govern’ by way of a large parliamentary majority. Of course, the presidential call for a parliamentary majority precedes 2002; most notably, in 1981, when victorious Socialist President François Mitterrand called on the people to ‘give me the means to govern’ and implement his presidential programme. But the relationship has become more mechanical since the 2000 reform changed the order of the electoral contests to ensure that the ‘decisive’ presidential election came before the ‘confirmatory’ parliamentary contest. Certainly, the figures have produced rather different variations of the presidential bonus since 2002, but on each occasion a party with a plurality of votes on the first round has achieved an absolute majority of seats after the second: the UMP in support of President Chirac in 2002, the UMP for Sarkozy in 2007 and the PS for Hollande in 2012 (Roger, 2017b).

The 2017 parliamentary election was chiefly interesting in that it provided mechanisms of institutional continuity in the midst of great political uncertainty and change. The first round spectacularly confirmed the trend: with 32.55 per cent of first round votes, Macron’s La République en marche (LRM) obtained the overall parliamentary majority called for by the president, without needing the numerical support provided by its allies, Bayrou’s MODEM. The flip side was that this Herculean majority, elected to support a Jupiterean president, was based on a record low turnout for a parliamentary election in the Fifth Republic: 48.7 percent in the first round; 42.7 per cent in the second. The confirmation election is implicitly based on a lesser popular

mandate (hence legitimacy) than the decisive presidential contest, though this distinction is nowhere formally recognised.

With the election of Macron, the old world of left-right partisan politics has appeared to be crumbling at the edges. The victory of the LRM/MODEM ticket was announced so far in advance that its actual majority was considered to be somewhat disappointing – and certainly well below the true ‘blue chambers’ of 1993 and 2002⁹. The overall parliamentary victory was a remarkable achievement for a movement created barely one year earlier; it was crowned by the arrival in the National Assembly of a new generation of mainly inexperienced politicians, professionals and representatives of civil society (Ollion, 2017). The 2017 electoral series, however, leaves intact the overall crisis of confidence in the political system: not only was turnout in the two rounds of the parliamentary elections at an all-time low, but almost 10 per cent cast a spoilt or invalid vote in the second round.

Drilling down into more detail, the first round of the parliamentary election confirmed the mechanical distrust and rejection of the incumbent parties: with 7.44 per cent, the PS barely performed better than its presidential candidate, notwithstanding the advantage of incumbency. Even if we add the Ecologists (EELV) (4.30 per cent)¹⁰, the left Radicals (PRG) (0.47 per cent) and divers gauche (1.06 per cent), the PS and its allies polled a bare 13 per cent of those voting and were reduced to a rump

⁹ In 1993, the RPR-UDF had a large overall majority with 482 deputies out of 577. In 2002, the UMP and allies returned 398 out of 577 deputies.

¹⁰ A precautionary note: this total conflates those constituencies where EELV was allied to a PS candidate, as well as those where it stood alone, or in alliance with the FI.

parliamentary representation after the second round: PS 30 seats, PRG 3, divers gauche 12, Ecologist 1. The decline of the established parties was asymmetrical, however. LR and its allies performed marginally better (LR, 15.77 per cent; UDI, 3.03 per cent; divers droite 2.76 per cent) and, above all, resisted better in the second round than its leaders had been expecting, returning a total of 135 députés (113 LR, 17 UDI and 6 divers droite). Mélenchon's LFI elected 17 députés, including Mélenchon himself in a Marseilles constituency, but declined to 11.03 per cent of first round vote share. The Communist Party (PCF) (2.72 per cent) defended its bastions well, electing 11 députés and was able to form a parliamentary group with the support of a handful of overseas députés. The FN (13.20 per cent) was in steep decline from the first round of the presidential election and ended up with only eight deputies, including Marine Le Pen (one of five returned in the Pas-de-Calais department).

One of the routines of French parliamentary elections is for the smaller isolated parties to criticise the operation of the electoral system. 2017 was no exception. With 32.55 per cent of first round votes, the LRM-MODEM alliance obtained 350 députés (rising to 359 once the parliamentary groups were formed) – or 61% of the total, the second ballot system routinely inflating the number of seats obtained by the largest party. The second largest party – LR and allies – obtained 21.56 per cent vote share, yet finished with almost 25 per cent of seats. These effects are consistent with the operation of the second-ballot electoral system in the Fifth Republic's parliamentary elections (Cole and Campbell, 1989). The main effect of the electoral system is to under-represent parties unable to form alliances: the case of the FN, with 13.20 per cent of first round votes, yet under 2 per cent of seats, is the most striking example. President

Macron's call in July 2017 for a 'dose' of proportional representation for parliamentary elections would represent one important step in the broader project of political modernization.

The second mechanic is the return of the presidential party, or the majority elected primarily to support an incumbent president. True, the presidential party is a contested concept (Cole, 1993). And certainly, no presidential party was ever the same. De Gaulle's UNR had facets of a personal rally to a leader vested with a particular historic legitimacy, but it collapsed once the General had gone. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's attempts to build the Independent Republicans/Republican Party into the cornerstone of his Union for French Democracy never really succeeded and this failure undermined the cohesion of the 1974–81 mandate. On the left of French politics, many Socialists never really bought into Mitterrand's instrumental marriage of the incentive structure of the presidential institutions and the revival of party fortunes. Nonetheless, the election of a PS majority to back the president in 1981 provided a powerful political resource to ensure that Mitterrand got his way; in contrast, the failure of the PS to obtain an overall majority in the 1988 parliamentary election undermined the legitimacy of the Rocard, Cresson and Bérégovoy governments, forced to rely on the use of article 49.3 of the 1958 constitution to govern without a real majority.¹¹ The UMP (2002–12) reverted to

¹¹ Article 49.3 allows a government to ask for a vote of confidence in relation to a particular legislative proposal. If there is no majority for the vote of no confidence, the legislation is adopted. This pro-executive clause has allowed minority governments to survive. It was amended as part of the 2008 constitutional reform; its use is now limited to once per parliamentary session, in addition to the Finance and Social Security laws.

form: the party of the ‘right and the centre’ was largely ignored by the successive presidents (Chirac and Sarkozy) who saw its main function as being to organise the president’s supporters in parliament. Macron’s LRM can be seen as the latest version of the presidential party and it is likely to follow a tested lifestyle: electoral triumph, the growth of internal dissensions, diminishing political returns and ultimate political defeat. Whatever awaits, President Macron’s coronation is now complete with the presidential majority that he has called for.

Interpreting 2017

After the Brexit outcome in the UK’s referendum on the European Union in June 2016 and Donald Trump’s election as US president in November 2016, many journalists and political commentators across the world assumed that the French presidency would be the next domino to fall. At a rather less cataclysmic level of analysis, 2017 appeared as make or break time for the French presidency, victim in turn of a deep crisis of trust in political institutions and politics in general, a crisis not specifically limited to France (Grossman and Sauger, 2017). Though the eventual outcome firmly challenged these major and minor versions of impending disaster, the 2017 electoral series left a series of questions unanswered. Our analytical take is that these electoral moments of 2017 are best understood in the context of a framework of analysis that combines three levels: the institutional, the partisan and the situational. The framework used not only elucidates the extraordinary campaign and results, but places them in a diachronic perspective.

The institutional dimension provided the backdrop to the 2017 campaign. Two of the five leading candidates developed a highly critical stance towards the presidential office, with Mélenchon and Hamon in particular mounting a critique of the Fifth Republic and advocating a Sixth Republic based on either a constituent Assembly or strengthened parliamentary institutions, while Marine Le Pen also in practice rejected the Fifth Republican institutional edifice (Rousseau, 2017). However, the Sixth Republic was a rallying cry that fell flat. Not the least of the paradoxes of the 2017 electoral series lay in the victory of a candidate for whom political modernisation has been framed in terms of a return to the sources of the Fifth Republic. Macron's use of the metaphor of Jupiter, the god of gods in Roman mythology, is intended to renew with the figure of the Republican monarch, fallen into disuse since Chirac (the absent president), Sarkozy (the fast president) and Hollande (the normal president). Jupiter is above common mortals, and determines the fate even of the most powerful gods (Van Laer, 2017). The president is cast once again as a supra-partisan republican monarch, who symbolises the state and whose rare communication gives meaning and direction to the nation. Jupiter also confers the image of a president above the fray, above the routine competition of parties, suspicious of parliament and alone vested with supreme decision-making authority. Finally, it is a 'performative' metaphor: to remind voters that President Macron has renewed with the noble expression of state authority, with the expectation that this social construction will impact upon the behaviour of the other political actors. When the tide turns, however, the metaphor might also give rise to ridicule. Macron would be well advised not to interpret the overall parliamentary majority as a mandate for blind change. If the presidency has escaped its worst-case

scenario, and if Macron's election provides a window of opportunity to revive the presidency, the question of political and institutional trust is far from resolved.

The partisan dimension was the core concern of the 2017 election, but it was understood almost entirely in a negative sense. Almost all aspects of the 2017 campaign came back to party: the fragmentation of the party system; the withering away of the Socialists, at remarkable speed; the divisions within the *Républicains* and FN; the proliferation of party parliamentary groups in the new Assembly¹²; the success of political movements playing on the public's distaste for the traditional parties, with their ostensibly broken promises and disreputable political practices. If measured solely in terms of the reconfiguration of the party system, there is a strong case that this was indeed a realigning election (marked by the sweeping away of the orthodox parties and the ascendancy of LRM). The emergence of LRM has already produced a major rejuvenation of France's political personnel.¹³

There remain questions, however, over whether the 'non-ideological' political space beyond left and right can durably be occupied or whether, as past President

¹² At the time of writing (August 2017) there are a total of 7 parliamentary groups : LRM (314 députés), MODEM (45), LR (100), UDI-LR constructifs (30), France insoumise (17), PCF and allies (15) and Nouvelle gauche [PS and allies] (33).

¹³ A massive 434 députés (out of 577) elected in June 2017 were newcomers to parliament, often from civil society, with no prior formal political experience (though many had experience at other levels of public administration). Women now represent 38.6 per cent of representatives in the National Assembly. The age of the average député was 48.6 in 2017, against 54.8 in 2012. *Le Monde*, 'Une Assemblée plus jeune et plus féminine', 20 June 2017.

Giscard d'Estaing discovered to his cost, the quest to represent two out of every three French citizens will fade away as the business of making difficult choices begins. More profoundly, has the anti-party rhetoric gone too far? Parties are intermediary institutions whose efficient functioning is necessary for democracy. LRM will need to become more of a party, albeit primarily a presidential one, not only to provide disciplined support for President Macron and the government of his prime minister, Édouard Philippe, but also to mediate the inevitable tensions that power will bring. The experience of past presidential parties suggests that, if it is to survive for more than one presidential term, it will need to articulate a coherent political discourse that is not merely a form of subservience to Jupiter, the omnipotent president. Such will be the real measure of whether a partisan realignment has indeed taken place.

The 2017 electoral series also demonstrated that context matters. The dynamics of the 2017 electoral campaign were highly unpredictable, in part the result of events (for example, the recurrent affairs or Hollande's decision not to stand for re-election), in part a reflection of the changing contexts within which electoral campaigns are fought. The LR and PS primaries contributed to the impression of a permanent electoral campaign, driven by social media and especially the prominence of permanent 24 hour news channels such as BFMTV. A more structural reading is also pertinent: reasoning in terms of the electoral series has replaced a narrower focus on the 'decisive' election as the key concept to explain presidential ascendancy. In the literature of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the 'decisive' election usually signified the presidential contest, though parliamentary elections also demonstrated their 'decisive' character in 1986, 1993 and 1997.

With the 2000 constitutional reform, it made more sense to reason in terms of the electoral series, an electoral play in at least four acts: the two rounds of the ‘decisive’ presidential election, followed closely by the two rounds of the ‘confirming’ parliamentary contest. In this four-round play, the first round of the presidential election was the key ballot. The novelty of the 2017 series was that it consisted of six, or even eight rounds: the LR and PS primaries and the two rounds of the presidential and parliamentary contests. Not surprisingly, voter lassitude gathered pace with each successive round. By the time of the parliamentary election, a majority of voters did not bother turning up. Whether this lassitude was down to voter fatigue, distaste for politicians, a desire to limit President Macron’s parliamentary majority or some combination of these, it embedded the sense of distance between the overwhelming parliamentary majority obtained by President Macron and the active support of only 15 per cent of registered voters behind LRM candidates in the first round of the parliamentary election. Jupiter is already being brought down to earth.

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Table 1: Second round presidential run-offs 1965-2012

| YEAR | RUN-OFF CANDIDATES | TYPE OF SECOND ROUND CONTEST | PRESIDENT |
|------|--|---|-------------------|
| 1965 | De Gaulle (Gaullist) v. Mitterrand (Union of the left) | Left-Right Bipolar (Gaullists versus united left) | De Gaulle |
| 1969 | Pompidou (Gaullist) v. Poher (centre-right) | Competition within the centre and right | Pompidou |
| 1974 | Giscard d'Estaing (Independent Republican) v. Mitterrand (Union of the left) | Left-Right bipolar (non-Gaullist centre- right versus united left) | Giscard d'Estaing |

| | | | |
|------|--|--|------------|
| 1981 | Giscard d'Estaing (UDF) v. Mitterrand (PS) | Left-Right bipolar (UDF versus PS) | Mitterrand |
| 1988 | Mitterrand (PS) v. Chirac (RPR) | Left-Right bipolar (PS versus RPR) | Mitterrand |
| 1995 | Jospin (PS) v. Chirac (RPR) | Left-Right bipolar (PS versus RPR) | Chirac |
| 2002 | Chirac (UMP) v. Le Pen (Front National) | Competition between mainstream right and far-right | Chirac |
| 2007 | Sarkozy (UMP) v. Royal (PS) | Left-Right bipolar (UMP versus PS) | Sarkozy |
| 2012 | Hollande (PS) v. Sarkozy (UMP) | Left-Right bipolar (PS versus UMP) | Hollande |

Table 2: Campaign fortunes for the leading candidates in 2017

| Candidate | Jan 2016 | May 2016 | Sept 2016 | Dec 2016 | Feb 2017 | April 2017 | Result 23 April 2017 |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---|
| | | | | | | | |
| Marine le Pen | 26 | 28 | 29 | 24 | 26 | 22.5 | 21.3 |
| PS candidate[Hollande, Valls/Hamon] | 20 | 14 | 13 | 11 | 14.5 | 8 | 6.36 |
| LR candidate[Sarkozy/Fillon] | 21 | 21 | 22 | 26 | 18.5 | 19.5 | 20.01 |
| Melenchon | 9 | 12 | 13 | 13 | 12 | 19 | 19.58 |
| Macron | - | - | - | 13 | 23 | 23 | 24.01 |
| Bayrou | 13 | 13 | 12 | 6 | - | - | - |

Source: figures drawn from the CEVIPOF's *Enquête électorale française*. The 23 April figure is that provided by the French Interior ministry.